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For Immediate Release...

Corrections News

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Sixteen dogs graduate from Algoa Correctional Center's S.T.A.R.S. program

Complete with caps and tassels, Algoa Correctional Center's (ACC) largest class of graduates from the Puppies for Parole program participated in a commencement ceremony April 26 held in their honor. The 16 canine graduates, their offender handlers, Department of Corrections (DOC) officials and guests attended the "changing of the leash" in the visiting room of ACC in Jefferson City. The leash ceremony is where the handlers give their canine companions' leashes over to the dogs' new owners.

All the dogs brought to ACC come from Garrett Animal Shelter in Fulton. Including the April 26 graduates, 46 dogs have completed the Puppies for Parole training program at ACC. ACC has named its training program S.T.A.R.S. – Socialization Training for Animals' Re-entry into Society.

Scott Lawrence, ACC warden, said 100 percent of the graduates have been adopted so far. Fifteen of the latest graduates have also been adopted and one's adoption is pending. Lawrence said the shelter in Fulton had to euthanize a high number of dogs before the program at ACC started, but since its inception in June 2011, the shelter hasn't had to euthanize any adoptable dogs.

Tina Barnes, animal control supervisor at Garrett, agreed, saying, "The program has really helped us by keeping our numbers down and helping the dogs become more adoptable."

The Puppies for Parole program consists of an eight- to 12-week training period where the dogs learn verbal commands and general obedience. Typically, each dog is paired with two offender handlers during their stay and must pass a Canine Good Citizenship Test before graduating. Puppies for Parole began on Feb. 1, 2010, at Jefferson City Correctional Center and has since been adopted by 17 other DOC facilities throughout the state.

"I think it's one of the best programs that we have within the department," said Tina Sutton, ACC unit manager and S.T.A.R.S. program coordinator.

Sutton said the recent graduation – ACC's fourth ceremony – was a special day for Casey, a great dane/boxer mix, who was brought to the facility when he was 6 months old. She said Casey was too shy and timid to graduate his first time around. Casey made major improvements since he was brought to ACC and was ready to go home with his new owner after the ceremony.

"He has progressed so far," Sutton said. "He's still not the most outgoing, but he is the most loving."

Puppies for Parole is a rehabilitative process for the inmates as well as the dogs. DOC Director George Lombardi calls the program a "wonderful opportunity" for the offenders to give back to the community. Lombardi said program participation results in improved conduct and an increase in offenders' sense of responsibility.

Puppies for Parole is funded solely by donations and does not receive state funding. For Puppies for Parole adoption and donation information, visit: doc.mo.gov/division/dai/puppies.php.

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